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Daniel Knorr

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Knorr, Daniel, "The Internet and China's Response to the Japan Earthquake" (2011). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 846.
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The Internet and China's Response to the Japan Earthquake

April 25, 2011 in [Op-Ed](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Daniel Knorr

A few days after the Japan earthquake last month, the high school student I tutor asked if I had considered leaving Beijing with my wife. I had been keeping up with the news about the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear plant, and to the best of my knowledge there was no real threat to us in Beijing so I was a little surprised by his question. Even though I assumed the nuclear plant was the source of his concern, I asked what he was referring to. (Honestly, part of me was a little afraid that he knew something I didn't.) When he confirmed that it was Fukushima that was on his mind, I tried to reassure him that there was little or no danger to Beijing, but he was still rather worried—understandable given the magnitude of the disaster that had just occurred not so very far away.

In the face of such a massive crisis and the subsequent frightening possibility of a nuclear meltdown, people understandably reacted in very different ways. Along with my student, a lot of people here in China were simply afraid and thus prone to believe all sorts of rumors, many spread online. Although not surprising, the role of internet communication in responses to the earthquake and tsunami is what has struck me most in the weeks since the earthquake. The internet has been talked about quite a bit recently in relation to stories such as Egypt's internet shutdown after the outbreak of protests and the Chinese government's increased censorship of the internet and telecommunications (as well as the apparent recent Gmail hack). Because the issues of social media and online communication in China have been attached to questions of censorship and political protest, though, I think it is worthwhile to think about them in another context that may shed some more (or at least different) light on how they relate to current events, the mainstream media, government controls, and the lives of ordinary people.

The most well-known example of rumors going viral online, of course, is the one that caused a [panicked buying of salt](#) in many parts of China in mid-March, out of a belief that eating enough table salt could offset the effects of radiation poisoning, as well as a fear that radiation contamination would lead to a shortage of sea salt. One of the originators of this rumor [has been detained and fined](#), but the effect was widespread and far outpaced the ability of news outlets and government offices to combat it. I heard another earthquake-related rumor second-hand, through a teacher of mine. She asked a classmate and me if we had heard that Yuko Yamaguchi, the designer of Hello Kitty, had died in the tsunami; I only found out several days later from a news report that this too was a fictitious rumor, as were others about the deaths of various Japanese celebrities. Fortunately, false reports about the spread of radiation into China did not cause a panicked exodus from coast cities, which certainly would have caused more harm than buying some extra bags of salt and wrongly believing a celebrity had died.

I don't know why exactly people started these rumors, but their lightning-fast dissemination confirms the power of the internet to rapidly spread information regardless of whether it is true or false, as well as its capacity to prompt mass action or belief, a fact as true of China as of anywhere else.

To some degree, this could actually justify the government's policy of censorship and desire to control the flow of information. I found it hard to disagree with the decision to arrest and fine the internet user who started the spread of the salt rumor. Of course, this is hardly unique to China: after all, free speech in the U.S. has its limits, such as the prohibition against shouting "Fire!" in a crowded movie theater. Maybe the enormous effect of a single rumor spreading to millions of people through the internet emphasizes the inherent interest of the government in protecting the stability of the crowded movie theater that is China (and the whole world wide web, for that matter). At the same time, though, it showed that censorship and official news outlets cannot match the speed at which this kind of rumor can spread, and that repairing the damage caused by false information disseminated online is no easy or simple task, particularly

when the public has little faith in the official media. Once the cat is out of the bag, it's very difficult to get it back in—and even government control is no match for a spontaneous uprising of salt-buyers.

It would be wrong to think that the only reactions to the disaster have come from the media, people who spread rumors online, and those who blindly listen to one and/or the other. A couple of days after the tsunami, one of my teachers started talking with my class about the safety of nuclear plants, how many there were in the U.S., where they were, how reliant the U.S. and China are on nuclear power, etc. Of course, this is a large and ongoing issue in the U.S., and I suspect that it is that way for a number of people in China as well. However, the reports I have seen about nuclear plants in China and about the possibility of radiation coming from Japan have been reassuring in tone, and the media doesn't seem too ready to wade into this issue.

This is not to say that safety is not a concern for the Chinese government, or for the Chinese media. Everywhere you go in Beijing you see signs exhorting safety, especially when it comes to transportation and construction:



Pollution and environmental protection are big issues, too, so it seems natural that there would be official and public concern about the safety of China's nuclear plants, especially when people hear about rural villages whose land and crops have suffered long-term contamination from nearby factories and numerous dairies being shut down because of quality concerns. While the role of Chinese media vis-à-vis holding the government, individual officials, and large state and private enterprises accountable is still developing, some journalists are undeniably interested in highlighting environmental issues and their impact on the Chinese people (as discussed in [this report](#) by *The Guardian's* Jonathan Watts).

As one would expect in the response to a major catastrophe, reporting and public attention has ebbed as time has passed. While there is still uncertainty about the final, overall effects of the radiation leak, the real issue now, I think, is how this disaster will settle into the minds of people here. Will it be remembered as another tragic, yet unavoidable natural catastrophe? Or will it come to represent something more, as, for example, Hurricane Katrina symbolized social inequality and the aloofness of the federal government for U.S. citizens? It is possible that Japan could become a cautionary tale about the dangers of economic development and the need for public accountability. The final outcome, I think, will depend on the response of the Japanese people and the attention their actions receive from Chinese media and the discussion this may or may not prompt among China's informed netizenry.

Daniel Knorr is currently a student at the Inter-University Program in Beijing and will be attending graduate school at UC Irvine in the fall.